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The American Frontier—Frontier of What?

CARLTON J. H. HAYES

IT IS now over half a century since Frederick Jackson Turner assisted in Chicago at the international celebration of the discovery of America by reading his famous paper on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." "Almost without critical test," as Professor Paxson has remarked, the frontier hypothesis in that paper met with prompt and well-nigh unanimous acceptance by historians of the United States. And during succeeding years, we all know, it has inspired and been exploited in a multitude of tomes and monographs. Nowadays none of our university departments of history is complete without a frontier specialist, and no one, even a New Yorker, would essay a history of the United States, whether for the profession, the general reader, or the schools, without paying homage to the Turner hypothesis.

* Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting in Washington on December 17, 1945. The author is professor of history in Columbia University.

1 Frederic L. Paxson, in Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, XV (1935), 132–33.
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President of the American Historical Association

1945
Our historical guild should have no illusion or pessimism about its ability, in the long run, to lodge in popular consciousness practically any interpretation or reconstruction of the past upon which it may concentrate. It can certainly perceive and rejoice that its concentration for a half century on the significance of the frontier in American history has been productive not only of caviar for seminars but of common fare for journalists and radio commentators. The hypothesis has become axiomatic that our democracy and social progress and national mores have been chiefly, if unconsciously, the creation of frontiersmen, as these, in an epic sweep westward across the continent, successively wrested new free lands from the wilderness and the Indians and there, "as nowhere else in recorded history, set up institutions relatively free from coercion by either law or habit."

I have neither the intention nor the competence to criticize this hypothesis. I can only bow, with respect and envy, to the numerous scholars in American history who, with extraordinary industry and enthusiasm, and in great detail, have applied and tested it during the last half century. I wonder, however, if the time has not come when our historians might profitably broaden their conception of the frontier and extend their researches and writing into a wider field. For granting that the frontier has been a major factor in the historical conditioning and development of what is distinctive in the United States, a large and now, I believe, most pertinent question remains about the American frontier. It is a frontier of what?

This would seem an obvious question, with an obvious answer. The answer was, indeed, clearly indicated several years ago by the late President Dixon Ryan Fox in a series of brilliant essays, and likewise by the late Professor William R. Shepherd in his graduate lecture course and seminar on European expansion and in articles he published in the *Political Science Quarterly*. Both those scholars, and a considerable number of others, including the California "school" of Professor Herbert Bolton, regarded the advancing frontier in North America, like similar frontiers in South America, Australasia, and South Africa, as a frontier of Europe. They were concerned with the transit of culture from Europe, or from already Europeanized overseas areas, to the frontier, as well as with the reverse cultural influences of the frontier.

Unfortunately, such broad vision was shared by relatively few specialists in American history, and it led to no appreciable lessening of their absorption

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in the frontier itself and in the one-way influences of the frontier upon purely American developments. One conventionally assumed that the frontier was a western frontier of the eastern United States. It was viewed as a peculiarly American phenomenon, determining the unique character of our own national society and culture.

II

The vogue of this restricted interpretation of the American frontier, and the concurrent neglect of broader and otherwise obvious considerations, have been, I submit, at once a result and a stimulant of growing intellectual isolationism in the United States. Our isolationism, of course, has many aspects, political and economic as well as intellectual, and many explanations. Before the days of steamships and airplanes we were, in truth, remote from the rest of the world; and our achievement of political independence naturally fostered an ambition for intellectual independence. Moreover, a lurking suspicion of inferiority, which long lingered with us, has had the usual psychological compensation in strident assertion of superiority. And for utilitarian purposes, as well as under romantic influences, we have cultivated a lusty nationalism, the more intense because the more artificial. In Europe, everybody has been conscious of belonging to a particular nationality, with distinctive language and traditions, and nationalism has been a more or less natural flowering of the consciousness of nationality. In the United States, on the other hand, nationalism has been the fertilizer, rather than the flower. It has here been spread and utilized as the most effective means of producing in a population of very diverse origins—linguistic, religious, and racial—a common and luxuriant consciousness of belonging to a new and unique nationality. All this has inoculated us against Europe and built up an isolationist state of mind.

In all this, too, our historiography has played no inconsiderable part. It was marked, in the first generation of our political independence, by patriotic and panegyrical works, shelved now but influential then, such as David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*, Timothy Pitkin's *Political and Civil History of the United States of America*, and the biographies of Washington by Mason Weems and John Marshall. Afterwards, for two succeeding generations and well into the 1880's, its central monument was George Bancroft's elaborate presentation of American history as an unfolding of the Deity's grand design to enshrine in the New World and particularly in the United States the ark of the covenant of liberty and democracy.

Since the introduction, in the 1870's and 1880's, of professional university training, with its inculcation of scientific spirit and methods, American
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Historiography has understandably reacted against the puerilities of a "Parson" Weems and the grandiose pietism of a Bancroft. Yet, if our historical writing has latterly become more critical in manner, it is not less American in subject matter and emphasis. Indeed, a striking general fact about it during the past seventy years has been the tendency to turn away from European themes and to concentrate upon strictly American. The seventy years mark a new and self-imposed sort of "Babylonian Captivity." There have been no real successors to Prescott, Motley, and Parkman; our recent literary historians write epics of the United States.

For every monograph or doctoral dissertation in European history during the past twenty years, there have been at least a dozen in American history. And whereas formerly every research worker in American history had had some basic training in medieval or modern European history, nowadays one can, and frequently does, produce a dissertation in a state of comparative innocence about what has occurred outside the geographical confines of the United States. This circumstance and the narrowing specialized training of our university seminars must explain why so many younger investigators of the American frontier have neglected its broader relationships and been indifferent to its comparative study. Even the growing number of economic determinists among us tend more and more to seek confirmation of their faith in exclusively American events.

Yet apparently the isolationist and nationalist trend in American historiography is not deemed fast or effective enough. In the columns of a leading metropolitan newspaper is alarmingly broadcast a series of embarrassing disclosures that there are "facts" of American history which high-school and college graduates have not learned, or do not remember. To remedy the sorry situation, state laws are being rapidly enacted by politicians addicted to Fourth of July oratory, and curriculums are being correspondingly refashioned by professional "educators." We are going to compel the next generation to have more American history—and, perforce, less of any other: the very generation which we expect to carry successfully the new and manifold international responsibilities we have assumed.

Of course the backbone of the schooling of our young people should be history—solid, vertebrate history—and not any of the amorphous jelly-like substitutes for it which were a fad with curriculum-makers between the first and second World Wars. But I, for one, do not see how we substantially improve matters by expanding a high-school course in American history from one year to two or three and telescoping all the rest of man's past and the history of all other nations into a single year or half year of fleeting elementary
generalization quaintly described as "world history." Nor do I perceive how a college sequence or a university doctorate in "American civilization" is going to prepare our students and scholars for enlightened participation in the transcendent responsibilities of the United States as a world power, that is, unless "American civilization" is intimately and historically related to the original and widely ramifying civilization of which it is but a fragment.

The present trend, if unchecked, can only confirm the popular myths that the "American way of life" is something entirely indigenous, something wholly new, and something vastly superior to any other nation's. It is also likely to strengthen our people's missionary and messianic impulse, which will have far greater scope and far greater opportunity for expressing itself in the current aftermath of the second World War, and which, if unattended by realistic knowledge of other peoples and their historic cultures, may lead to the most dangerous consequences for the United States itself. Just when we are recognizing the futility of political isolation and joining at long last an international security organization, and when, through reciprocal trade agreements and acceptance of the Bretton Woods proposals, we are abandoning efforts at economic isolation, it is astonishing and paradoxical that at the same time we should keep alive and actually intensify an intellectual isolationism.

From the bitter experiences of recent years, we, as a nation, have derived surprisingly few lessons affecting our thinking. We have doubtless become a bit more aware of some kind of relationship between the United States and the world outside, and more inclined to wishful thoughts about a universal utopia which our sanguine publicists alluringly, though vaguely, picture as "the bright new world of tomorrow." Doubtless, too, certain patent strategic needs of the moment, coupled with a good deal of public advertising, have aroused a special interest in Latin America and popularized the concept of "hemispheric solidarity," which probably signifies, however, only a shift of isolationism from the nation to the hemisphere. At any rate, there can be no doubt that the bulk of Americans, including the bulk of our so-called intellectuals, continue to think, in essentially isolationist terms, of separate "Old World" and "New World," of detached Eastern and Western Hemispheres, of "Europe for the Europeans" and "America for the Americans."

This dichotomy in our thinking is the result, let me repeat, of ignorance, of self-centered absorption in local or sectional concerns, and of nationalist propaganda. It is unrealistic, contrary to basic historical facts, and highly dangerous for our country at the present and in the future.
We used to know that we were Europeans as well as Americans, that we were not Indians or a people miraculously sprung from virgin forests like the primitive Germans described by Tacitus, but modern Europeans living in America on a frontier of Europe. All our original white ancestors on this continent knew they came from Europe. They and their sons and grandsons knew they had ties with Englishmen, Spaniards, Portuguese, Hollanders, or Frenchmen, as the case might be, not only on this side of the ocean but on the other. And generation after generation of their descendants on this side, no matter on what segment of the frontier they chanced to be, and no matter how intent on clearing new lands, were concerned and found themselves participants in all the successive major wars of Europe from the sixteenth century to the twentieth: the English-Spanish wars, the English-Dutch wars, the War of the League of Augsburg, the War of the Spanish Succession, the War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years' War, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the war of 1914, the war of 1939. From the first, moreover, it has been known or knowable, if latterly obscured, that our language, our religion, our culture are rooted in Europe, that our ideals of liberty and constitutional government are a heritage of Europe.

In paying tribute to the members of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Charles A. Beard has remarked:

It is not merely patriotic pride that compels one to assert that never in the history of assemblies has there been a convention of men richer in political experience and in practical knowledge, or endowed with a profounder insight into the springs of human action and the intimate essence of government. It is indeed an astounding fact that at one time so many men skilled in statecraft could be found on the very frontiers of civilization among a population numbering about four million whites.\(^4\)

It is not quite so astounding, I would add, if one bears in mind that those men "on the very frontiers of civilization" possessed lively contacts with, and solid knowledge of, the European civilization on whose frontiers they were. One has only to run through the numbers of the *Federalist* to recognize the sure and firm grasp of such men as Hamilton, Madison, and Jay on the history and political experience of ancient Greece and Rome and of the countries of medieval and modern Europe—Britain, Germany, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Switzerland.\(^5\) The founding fathers may have been frontiersmen and greatly influenced by economic conditions in the New World, but they could readily have passed a searching examination for the doctorate in Euro-

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pean history and European comparative government, which, I dare say, is more than the majority of our senators or even of our Ph.D.'s in American history could now do.

That the United States could become an independent nation and enjoy the freedom and opportunity to extend its frontiers and greatly to increase its population and prosperity and strength during the perilous fifty years of Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and Metternichian reaction, from 1775 to 1825, is attributable less to American aloofness from Europe than to the informed statecraft of Americans who were then in familiar touch with Europe and equipped to treat with it intelligently and realistically. Almost without exception, our presidents and secretaries of state and key diplomats of that time had practical experience in European, as well as American, affairs—Franklin, Jefferson, Jay, Marshall, Madison, Monroe, John Adams, John Quincy Adams. Monroe, for example, served in diplomatic posts in France, England, and Spain for six years before he became Madison's Secretary of State, and his own Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, had been a student at Paris and Leiden and had had twenty years' diplomatic experience in France, the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain. The words which this qualified statesman put into Monroe's celebrated message of 1823 to the Congress expressed an enlightened realism in notable contrast with utterances and actions of certain American statesmen of a later date less in touch with the realities of Europe and more with ideological propaganda in America.

Said the message of 1823, without trace of a holier-than-thou attitude:

Our policy in regard to Europe . . . remains the same, which is, not to interfere in the internal affairs of any of its powers; to consider the Government de facto as the legitimate Government for us; to cultivate friendly relations with it, and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy; meeting, in all instances, the just claims of every power; submitting to injuries from none.

It was not only our statesmen of that time who knew and appreciated the relationship between Europe and America. Our colleges and academies, with their classical curriculum, and our literary men and publicists, with their extensive reading of British and French philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, possessed like knowledge and appreciation. Our commercial classes, including our cotton planters, had it, too. To protect our commerce with Europe, Jefferson dispatched to the Mediterranean an American armed expeditionary force which made landings in North Africa nearly a century and a half before the recent repetition of American campaigning in the Mediterranean. And what a reading public there was in the United States
for those literary historians in our "middle period"—Irving, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman—who dwelt on exploits of Spanish, Dutch, and French. It might well be envied by any historian of the American frontier or even by the Book-of-the-Month Club. The Mediterranean Sea was not then so far off, or the Atlantic Ocean so wide, as our developing isolationist nationalism later made them.

Our successive American generations of frontiersmen on the eastern seabord, in the piedmont, across the Alleghenies, along the Ohio, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi, over the prairies, and into and beyond the Rockies, may have thought of themselves as Americans first. They may have adopted Indian dress and Indian usages in hunting and fishing and scalping. They may have exerted, and doubtless did exert, a profound and lasting influence on the nationalist evolution of the United States. But all this did not make them Indians or immunize them against the superior and eventually mastering civilization which emanated from Europe and relentlessly followed them. They remained Europeans and retained at least the rudiments of European civilization. After all, the American frontier, as Professor Turner so ably and perhaps regretfully showed, was an evanescent phenomenon, ever passing from primitiveness toward the social and intellectual pattern of the area in back of it. In other words, the abiding heritage of traditional civilization outweighed, in a relatively brief period, the novelties acquired from Indians and wilderness. Continuity proved stronger than change. The transit of culture was not so much from as to the frontier.

Differences admittedly obtain between Americans in the United States and the peoples in Europe from whom they are descended, but the differences are not greater in kind, and hardly greater in degree, than those obtaining between Englishmen and Spaniards or between Germans and Italians, or between the people of the United States and the peoples of Central and South America. True, the nationalism which has progressively infected all peoples of Europe and America during the last hundred and fifty years has grossly exaggerated the differences and given wide currency to the notion of distinctive and self-contained national cultures—a French culture, a Norwegian culture, a Spanish culture, an American culture. The result has been an obscuring and neglect of what these several national cultures have in common, a European or "Western" culture, the community of heritage and outlook and interests in Europe and its whole American frontier.

Actual differences are differences of emphasis and detail, associated with political sovereignty and independence, and arising from variant geographical and historical circumstances. Back of them all, however, is a unifying fact
and force, which is describable as "European" or "Western," and which, now more than ever before, needs to be appreciated and applied. Actually and fundamentally, just as the European remains a European while thinking of himself first as an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German, or a Spaniard, so the descendants of Europeans in America remain European even while insisting that they are Americans first.

The frontier has undoubtedly been a very important source of what is distinctive and peculiar in the national evolution of the United States. But few European nations have been without a frontier in the American sense at some time in their history and without significant lasting effects of that frontier. Contemporary peculiarities in the life and customs of Spain, for instance, cannot be dissociated from the slow advance, during several centuries, of a frontier of conquest of Moorish lands; nor Germany's, from an analogous frontier in barbarous regions of north central Europe. In a larger way, all America is a frontier: Latin America, of Spain and Portugal; Quebec, of France; the United States, of Great Britain and Holland, Spain and France, Germany and Ireland, Scandinavia and Italy and Poland. Our Negroes and Indians, as these have been civilized, have been Europeanized as well as Americanized. The "melting pot" is no novelty in the history of Western civilization; it has latterly been doing in America, on a large scale, the same sort of fusing which at earlier dates produced the chief nations of modern Europe. Comparative study of frontiers in Europe and America, together with comparative study of melting pots and nationalisms in both, might serve to demonstrate that obvious differences between nations of European tradition are fewer and relatively less significant than their similarities.

IV

"European," as I here use the term, does not refer merely to a detached piece of geography or to a continent by itself, and not to another "hemisphere" or a hoary and pitiable "Old World." Rather, it refers to a great historic culture, the "Western" civilization, which, taking its rise around the Mediterranean, has long since embraced the Atlantic, creating what Mr. Walter Lippmann has appropriately designated the "Atlantic Community." As Professor Ross Hoffman says:

Every state of the North and South American continents originated from Western European Christendom which Voltaire, in the age before the independence movements, characterized so well as a "great republic," Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutchmen and Danes in the early modern centuries made the Atlantic Ocean the inland sea of Western civilization; they made it an his-

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torical and geographical extension of the Mediterranean. . . . Many of these early-forged bonds still span the Atlantic, and the spread of British, French, and American ideals of liberty and constitutional government has made this oceanic region the citadel of what today is rather loosely called Democracy.?

Of such an Atlantic community and the European civilization basic to it, we Americans are co-heirs and co-developers, and probably in the future the leaders. If we are successfully to discharge our heavy and difficult postwar responsibilities, we shall not further weaken, but rather strengthen, the consciousness and bonds of this cultural community.

Against it, militate two current trends of quite contradictory character. One, which I have already indicated, is the nationalistic tendency to view each nation as *sui generis*, and to attribute to it an independent and distinctive culture all its own. The second is the hypothesizing of a “world civilization.” This has already passed from the fictional titles of high-school textbooks to the solemn pronouncements of statesmen. It represents a leap from myopic nationalism to starry-eyed universalism. I, for one, have not the faintest idea what world civilization is. I know there are enduring and respectable civilizations in Moslem areas, in India, in China, and presumably in Japan. I also know there are considerable influences of such civilizations upon ours, and, especially in the material domain, heavy impacts by ours upon them. But the many existing civilizations still do not constitute a single “world civilization,” and for a long time to come, I hazard, the common denominator among them is likely to be low—as low, I should suppose, as unadorned “human nature.”

Neither devotion to one’s nation nor idealization of the world at large should obscure the important cultural entities which lie between. These are the powerhouses of civilization for their constituent nationalities, and the units which must be brought into cooperation for any world order of the future. The one to which Americans belong is the “European” or “Western.” It has conditioned our past. And whether we are aware of it, or not, it conditions our present and future.

In what does it consist? First, in the Greco-Roman tradition, with its rich heritage of literature and language, of philosophy, of architecture and art, of law and political concepts. Second, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its fructifying ethos and ethics, its abiding and permeating influence on personal and social behavior, its constant distinctions between the individual and the race, between liberty and authority, between mercy and justice, between what

7 Ross Hoffman, “Europe and the Atlantic Community,” Thought, XX (March, 1945), 25. See also his The Great Republic (New York, 1942) and Durable Peace (New York, 1944).
is Caesar's and what is God's. Third, proceeding from joint effects of the first two, it comprises traditions of individualism, of limitations on the state, of social responsibility, of revolt and revolution. Fourth, likewise proceeding from the others, particularly from the Christian tradition, it includes a tradition of expansiveness, of missionary and crusading zeal, which has inspired not merely a spasmodic but a steady pushing outward of European frontiers—from the Mediterranean to the Arctic and across the Atlantic, in turn over lands of Celts, Germans, Slavs, Magyars, and Scandinavians, over the full width of both American continents, and beyond to the Philippines and Australasia and into Africa.

In all these characteristics of European or Western civilization, every nationality of central and western Europe and of America shares. In measure as the frontier advances and is civilized, it is these characteristics which actuate and are embodied in the civilization. The United States is no exception.

One does not have to go to Athens and Rome to behold Greek and Roman architecture, or to Palestine and Europe to see Jewish synagogues and Christian churches. There are more churches and synagogues in the United States than in any other country in the world. There is more classical architecture in Leningrad or London than in Athens, and still more in Washington. It is indeed the practically official architecture of our American democracy from Jefferson to Hoover, and the favorite style for bank buildings, railway stations, and public schools, whether in Virginia or Illinois or the Far West. Our prevailing language continues to be transatlantic English, and distinctively American only in pronunciation and raciness of idiom. Shakespeare and Milton are as much ours as England's. Our juristic conceptions and legal usages are likewise transatlantic, and I know of no philosophical speculation on this continent, in the whole gamut from the pragmatic to the Thomistic, or on any subject from theological to scientific, including political and economic, which has not had its equivalent and usually its antecedent in Europe.

If we belonged to a Moslem or Confucian culture, or to a purely indigenous one, we would not have the mores which we have. We would not, for instance, be free on Sundays for church or golf or for surreptitious privacy in library or laboratory. Probably we would not use knives and forks, and we would wear different clothes. We might be more ceremonial and more externally polite. We might think, as well as behave, differently. Our sense of values and our frames of reference could not be quite the same. We are what
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we are only in part because of biological heredity and physical environment. In larger part it is because we are stamped from infancy with a historic culture of singularly educative and perduring potency.

V

The area of this common Western culture centers in the Atlantic and extends eastward far into Europe and along African shores, from Norway and Finland to Cape Town, and westward across all America, from Canada to Patagonia. It is the "Atlantic Community." Present concern with it is not one merely of historic roots or of antiquarian curiosity, or even of culture in the narrow sense of the word. Now, at the end of the second World War, when the United States projects its world-wide leadership into postwar reconstruction and the organization and maintenance of international peace and security, the Atlantic community assumes a crucial and very practical importance. It can be the balance between Eurasian Russia and the Far East, on one hand, and ourselves, on the other. In its solidarity is the safest guarantee of future world peace and of our own security and well-being as a nation. To quote Mr. Lippmann:

The Atlantic Community is no figment of the imagination. It is a reality. We ignored and neglected it at our peril. Twice we have had to restore it at prodigious cost. In this (latest) war the community is operating as a single strategic and logistic system under the combined chiefs of staff. . . . The combined command extends to the limits of the responsibilities and vital interests of this community. Thus it does not extend to Russia or to China. They are allies in a world coalition. With us they are the founding members of a world order of peace. . . . [But they] are not members of the integral community of nations facing the Atlantic Ocean who must, by the inexorable necessity of things, combine for their security and their survival. We can come to good and solid terms with China and with Russia, but only by recognizing, not by ignoring, this reality. And certainly we shall never come to good and solid terms with them, nor could they come to such with us, if our own system, the Atlantic Community, disintegrates.8

We have indeed paid heavily for past shortsightedness. We failed to recognize that our intervention in the first World War was to prevent the disintegration of the Atlantic community and that our ensuing task should have been, in our own interests, to strengthen and guarantee it. In this respect, the French in 1919-1920 were more realistic than we. If we had joined France and Britain in the League of Nations and especially if, within the framework of the League, we had ratified the treaty of military guarantees which President Wilson signed with Clemenceau and Lloyd George, who can doubt that the world and we ourselves would have been spared much of the later "blood, sweat, and tears"?

8 Lippmann, pp. 67-68.
As soon as the madly nationalist-imperialist Hitler catapulted himself to supreme power in Germany in 1933, it should have been evident that not merely his next-door neighbors but the whole Atlantic community, and with it our Western civilization, was threatened. I need not dwell on our ignorance and unconcern during the six or eight ensuing years, or on the lack of preparedness and energy displayed by England and France when first in 1939 they moved to arrest the threat. When in 1941, chiefly through the efforts of an unusually enlightened and historically minded President, Franklin Roosevelt, we became the “arsenal of democracy,” it was to fortify the Atlantic citadel, and, as a means to the same end, to help our Russian friends on the other side of the enemy.

Eventually, when Japan attacked us and directly involved us in the second World War, the most elementary exigencies of military strategy demanded that, in order to settle the score in the Far East, we should defend the Atlantic community, buttress Britain, secure the Iberian peninsula, and salvage France and Italy. This is why an army of ours landed and fought in North Africa, thereby demonstrating, as Professor Hoffman has pithily said, “that ‘from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli’ is a geopolitical truth!” And it was this same international community, this same embodiment of our Western culture, which expressed its deepest instincts and unwittingly described its own nature in the Atlantic Charter.

Despite recent practical experience, there is still, I fear, a widespread idea in America that war or threats of war in Europe should exclusively concern the nations of that continent, and that they could be prevented if those nations would form a federal union, a United States of Europe, on the model of the United States of America. If they would only do so, we could sink back into at least hemispheric isolation and realize the happy goal of America for the Americans and Europe for the Europeans.

This is quite fantastic. It ignores the stubborn fact that variety of nationalities and multiplicity of national states are ineluctable characteristics of our Western civilization. The nations of Europe are fully as self-conscious and as devoted to national freedom as the United States itself. They are no more willing to be merged in a Pan-European superstate than we would be in a Pan-American. Just as force would be required to bring Argentina and Brazil into a federal union with the United States, so would it be required to merge the several European states into one. For the latter objective, the use of force has repeatedly been tried throughout the course of modern history, but has invariably proved a disastrous failure, whether by Charles V or Philip II, by

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*Hoffman, in Thought, XX, 26.*
Louis XIV or Napoleon, by William II or Adolf Hitler. All such attempts not only have aroused the hostility of purely European nations but have precipitated oversea wars involving America.

The purely European nations, even if they were minded to form a union, are too few and weak to maintain it; and the adherence of nations possessing empires or major interests outside Europe would have disintegrating, rather than consolidating, results. France and Holland, for instance, are African or Indonesian and even American powers, as well as European, while Spain and Portugal are tied, in trade and sentiment, less with the European continent than with their colonies or former colonies oversea. As for Britain and the Soviet Union, the problem would be utterly insoluble. Neither would join a United States of Europe without bringing into it a huge imperial domain outside Europe, in which case the federation would be dominated by one or the other, or, more likely, it would be the prey of conflict between the two. And this would be but prelude to another world war, again involving the United States. Nor in an enforced or shaky European union but rather in a regional understanding among the nations of the Atlantic community are to be sought the peace and security of Europe and of ourselves, and the surest buttress of future world order.

Nor is there promise of security, or even validity, in the still more widely disseminated idea, within the United States, of an exclusive Pan-Americanism. We have grown so accustomed to thinking in geographical or narrowly political (and economic) grooves, and talking about "New World" and "Western Hemisphere," and fancying Pan-America to be a self-contained community of like-minded democratic republics, that we lose sight of the fact that Latin America is more closely related, in culture and outlook, with Latin Europe than with the United States. Moreover, that Pan-America is a very desirable and helpful association of frontier states does not render it a sufficiently strong bulwark of regional security unless it is conceived of and developed, militarily as well as culturally, as part of a larger Atlantic community.

This is precisely what military necessity has compelled us to do in the latest World War. For our own defense we sought the defense of all America, of the entire "New World." But for the successful defense of the "New World" we soon found that we must acquire a string of bases from Iceland down through the West Indies to Guiana and Brazil and over to the Azores, Casablanca, and Dakar, and eventually engage not only in the battle of the Atlantic but in the battles of Italy, France, and Germany. The defense of
America has required the defense of the whole Atlantic basin. And it will require it all the more in the era of airplane and atomic bomb.

If we learn this lesson, we shall recognize that the Pan American Union can never be developed into an effective regional security system unless Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Spain and Portugal participate in it, for by inexorable decrees of history and geography they belong to it. The permanent alliance projected at Chapultepec might well be extended to include them. Thereby we would be building, from small beginnings in the Monroe Doctrine, a mighty citadel of safety for the nations of the West and for the liberty and democracy we cherish.10

Moreover, we would thereby be restoring that equilibrium in world politics which is so indispensable to the successful operation of the new world league of United Nations devised at San Francisco. For, by discerning and taking our rightful place in an international regional community of which the Atlantic is the inland sea, we would be following an American foreign policy based alike on national interest and on enlightened concern for all the world's welfare. Ourselves secure in such a citadel, we could co-operate the more loyally and effectively, because the less suspiciously, with all the United Nations and do our full part in developing the new world order from wishful thinking to functioning reality. We could contribute more, rather than less, to the permanence of the settlements we must make with our Russian and Chinese friends in Asia and the Pacific, as well as those in Europe. Particularly we could rid ourselves of the craven fears of Soviet Russia which cost the world so dearly in the years between the two World Wars and which are by far the greatest menace to future peace and security. Being without fear, we could the more readily go hand in hand with the Soviet peoples along the road of material recovery and progress, and incidentally lend a stronger helping hand to China along the same road. All free states throughout the world could breathe more easily, and the world at large would have a better chance of adopting and maintaining the genuine democracy and liberty which are the glory of historic European civilization and especially of its American frontier.

VI

There will doubtless be dissent from the thesis I have here advanced, and from its implications. May I suggest, however, that, among us, dissent be attended by informed thought rather than by nationalist emotion. In the past,

10 This point is elaborated in an illuminating article by Ross Hoffman, "The West and Soviet Eurasia," The Sign, XXV (August, 1945), 5-8.
American historians, by concentrating their thought and labor more and more on the United States and its western frontier, have contributed immeasurably to the conscious solidifying, in time and space, of the great independent Republic of the New World. Now, when the Republic's old frontier, completing its westward march, has disappeared from the American continent and been superseded by new and quite different frontiers on distant isles of the Pacific, in the Azores, and on the Rhine and Danube, our historians, whether they agree or not with my particular views, might appropriately devote more attention to fields which have hitherto been relatively neglected and whose cultivation will be conducive to clearer appreciation in this country of its historic setting and current responsibilities.

It is no longer a question of creating a great American nation. It is now a question of preserving and securing this nation in a world of nations. Nor is it now a question of isolationism versus internationalism. This has finally been determined by the Senate's almost unanimous ratification of the Charter of the United Nations. The question now is whether as a nation we are going to be sufficiently informed and intelligent about foreign conditions, sufficiently freed from provincialism, to ensure the effective operation of the United Nations' organization in the best interest of ourselves and of world peace. Toward satisfactory solution of this question, American historians, if they will, can make major contributions.

One contribution would be to put much greater emphasis than in the past on cultural history—on the history of language and literature, of religion and church, of art and science, of intellectual currents, and of the transit of culture. Our national past and present, like the world's at large, are only partially explicable in terms of industrial and material development; and I would hope that the "economic interpretation," which has had such stimulating and valuable influence on historical research and writing during the past half century, might now be qualified and supplemented by a broader "cultural interpretation." There is doubtless already a trend in this direction. It is evidenced in a considerable number of recent monographs, and especially in the important co-operative History of American Life edited by Professor Schlesinger and the late President Fox. It requires, however, for its confirmation and proper fruitage much deepening and broadening and a much larger number of scholarly investigators and writers. It is cultural considerations, let me stress, which most profoundly affect American relationships with the world, not only of the past, but of the present and future.

I hope, too, that we shall not lose sight of the continuity of history. There
is a pronounced tendency in the United States to dwell on the "newness" and "uniqueness" of the "New World" and our "new nation"—new freedom, new frontier, new deal, new knowledge, new thought—and to accept a cataclysmic view of history. Serious historical scholars know—or should know—that such striking events as the invention of gunpowder or of printing, the discovery of America, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, were not really cataclysmic, that they merely speeded some continuous process long previously under way and left untouched vastly more habits of human thought and action than they altered. With this knowledge well in mind, we should be very skeptical of contemporary popular notions concerning the cataclysmic character of the Russian Revolution, the second World War, or even the atomic bomb. We may confidently expect that the world of the future will continue to be mainly the world of the past. The principal threads of our historic Western culture, like those of the Chinese or Moslem cultures, have not suddenly been cut in A.D. 1945. Unconsciously if not consciously, whether we like it or not, we shall go right on in the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions. It would be realistic to recognize the fact.

Of course, there is change, and what may properly be called progress, in America and in the world. But how are we to gauge it or to try intelligently to direct it without relating it to the constants and continuities in human experience? American history should, of course, be taught in our schools—more, rather than less, American history—but it should not be taught as beginning with the political independence of a new nation in 1776 or even with the discovery of a New World in 1492. To understand what America really is, of what actually it is a frontier, its history should be studied continuously from at least the ancient Greeks and the first Christians.

Finally, I would earnestly urge that greater attention be paid to comparative history. The comparative method is the surest means of diminishing racial, political, religious, and national prejudices. As the distinguished Belgian historian Henri Pirenne has written:

"These prejudices ensnare him who, confined within the narrow limits of national history, is condemned to understand it badly because he is incapable of comprehending the bonds attaching it to the histories of other nations. It is not due to parti pris but because of insufficient information that so many historians lack impartiality. One who is lost in admiration of his own people will inevitably exaggerate their originality and give them the honor for discoveries which are in reality only borrowed. He is unjust to others because he fails to understand them, and the exclusiveness of his knowledge lays him open to the deceptions of the idols set up by sentiment. The comparative method permits history to appear in its true
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perspective. What was believed to be a mountain is razed to the size of a molehill, and the thing for which national genius was honored is often revealed as a simple manifestation of the imitative spirit.¹¹

The student of the history of the United States, whether dealing with its political, economic, or cultural development, would be the better historian and the more enlightening if he was a specialist also in the history of a foreign country from which comparisons and contrasts could be drawn. Similarly, the student of the history of a foreign country could profitably extend his study beyond that country. Most of all, the historian of a particular phenomenon, such as nationalism, slavery, democracy, the frontier, etc., however specific in time or space may be his immediate work, must needs possess, if his work is to be informed and judicious, a wide background of acquaintance with other and comparable examples of the phenomenon.

In summary, the American frontier is a frontier of European or “Western” culture. This culture, however modified by or adapted to peculiar geographical and social conditions in America or elsewhere, is still, in essential respects, the culture and hence a continuous bond of the regional community of nations on both sides of the Atlantic. Like its predecessor and inspirer, the Mediterranean community of ancient times, the Atlantic community has been an outstanding fact and a prime factor of modern history. Despite the growth in latter years of an anarchical nationalism and isolationism on one hand, and of a utopian universalism on the other, the Atlantic community has lost none of its potential importance for us and for the world. We must look anew to it and strengthen our ties with it, if we are to escape the tragedy of another world war and ensure the blessings of liberty and democracy to future generations. To this end the historical guild in America can immeasurably contribute by extending the use of the comparative method, by emphasizing the continuity of history, and by stressing cultural and social, equally with political and economic, history.

¹¹ Henri Pirenne, “What Are Historians Trying to Do?” in Methods in Social Science, ed. by Stuart A. Rice (Chicago, 1931), pp. 444–45